

The Washington Post Outlook

SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 1967

Technological Disharmony

By Joshua Lederberg

ECONOMICS and esthetics are unfamiliar bedfellows, but the concept of technological harmony is beginning to emerge as the root need of our scientific culture. Technological disharmony may be a psychosomatic ill, the outward manifestation of distortions of moral integrity, but once established, it amplifies the frustrations of human moral purpose and creates new obstructions to the realization of the good life.

Science and Man

Biological disharmony includes cancers, the disorganized, self-serving growth of tissues that once performed exquisitely specialized functions in the economy of the body. What better analogy for the mortal diseases of contemporary civilization: unbridled nuclear power and unrestrained population increase.

These are both social diseases in the sense that human frailties like anxiety and love underlie them. They are also diseases of technological disharmony, for instruments like nuclear weapons and infant survival have been let loose without a corresponding dissemination of instruments for their tempered control.

On the national scene, many smaller conflicts and competing clamors are all too evident: urban transport and housing systems, aircraft, space, health, pollution, education.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield has voiced a probable consensus that this year's legislative program will focus on review and evaluation rather than innovation. In fact, many vital programs that have already been authorized remain to be fleshed out with detailed plans and execution, and with the cash to do them—

most urgent of all in the field of education.

Congress has excellent machinery for oversight and criticism of individual programs. The committee that passes on the authorization of funds has powerful leverage to bring the most thoughtful argument to its public hearings. These confrontations, vital for decision-making by an educated democracy, are among the greatest strengths of our political system.

However, Congress is poorly equipped to study the harmony of its overall program, a function that is left increasingly to the executive branch.

THIS IS GOOD testimony to the efficiency of executive authority. However, the secrecy that enshrouds the priority-setting work of the Bureau of the Budget is fundamentally opposed to the principle of democratic control. To be sure, the budgeteers are surely sensitive to the temper of the public and of the Congress, as expressed in the previous legislative session, at the polls and in private conference.

But democracy is a two-way street: among its most necessary and creative functions is the education of the electorate, and this process is utterly subverted by the most efficient decision making in private. No policies can be wisely criticized with the kind of information now

too closely held within that office. Many examples might be tinged with national security; the close-to-the-chest decision-making about the SST clearly is not.

Congress, faced with increasing burdens of technicality in the programs to which they must react, has been chafing for scientific advice comparable to that of the executive. But such a system is plainly unworkable: how many politically reliable, scientifically competent counselors are there to provide individual staff support to the whole legislature.

Even if there were enough bodies to go round, confidential advice defeats the main purpose of legislative overview: public enlightenment and reaction. The hearing

mechanism does provide exactly this, and it seems a mere political accident that no single committee is charged with the harmonizing function.

However, for the same reason that the Bureau of the Budget plays the central role in executive management, the Committees on Appropriations could play a role they now neglect as the legislative counterpart. After all, it is in these committees that all the committed dollars must be added up, that the competition among programs will then have to be equilibrated.

It would be a great public benefit if these powerful committees used their authority and prestige to call for periodic reassessment of our national goals.

© 1967, The Washington Post Co.